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President: Mr. Gurirab . . . . . (Namibia)

The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

Agenda item 36

Bethlehem 2000

Draft resolution (A/54/L.20)

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Senegal, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, to introduce draft resolution A/54/L.20.

Mr. Ka (Senegal), Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (*spoke in French*): It gives me great pleasure once again to address the Assembly on an item that is dear to the hearts of millions of people throughout the world: the forthcoming commemoration of the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the celebration of the new millennium in the symbolic city of Bethlehem. I believe that this event is of special importance, not merely for the Palestinians and the peoples of the region, but also for all believers throughout the world. For 16 months, from Christmas 1999 to Easter 2001, the Palestinian city of Bethlehem will be the site of the commemoration, in a spirit of joy and of hope, of this historic anniversary, which will coincide with the advent of the third millennium.

Thousands of visitors from all regions of the world, from all walks of life and from all faiths, will make the pilgrimage to Bethlehem for a unique experience in a spirit of communion, openness and sharing. The message that will be delivered at Bethlehem will be one of universal peace, dialogue and reconciliation. This strong message will, I am sure, reflect an aspiration so profound and fundamental that it will stimulate the imagination and energy of all people of goodwill.

As the Assembly is aware, the Palestinian Authority, in anticipation of masses of pilgrims arriving in Bethlehem, in 1997 launched the Bethlehem 2000 project in order to welcome the millions of tourists and pilgrims who wish to commemorate in Bethlehem a unique event in this holy land. In order to promote the particularly rich past of the city and to give a boost to the tourist industry, the Palestinian Authority has organized a series of projects.

The Bethlehem 2000 project, an enormous undertaking, seeks primarily to restore the religious and historical sites of the city and to upgrade the city's infrastructures. The restoration of these historical sites and the upgrading of the infrastructures, many of which are damaged and have been abandoned for many years now, have been real challenges for the Palestinian leadership. Years of conflict have had a negative impact not only on the socio-economic situation of the inhabitants of Bethlehem, but also on the condition of the sites and of the city's buildings and public services.

In order to lend support to the Bethlehem 2000 project, the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable

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Rights of the Palestinian People in May 1998 requested the inclusion of an item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" in the agenda of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly. Following an extremely interesting debate, the General Assembly adopted, without a vote, resolution 53/27 of 18 November 1998, in which it expressed support for the project and called for the international community's increased assistance and engagement to this laudable initiative.

In response to the General Assembly's request, the Committee last year implemented a programme of activities to heighten awareness of the Bethlehem 2000 project and to mobilize support for it. One of the most important activities was the convening of the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome, on 18 and 19 February 1999, in cooperation with the Italian Government and the Holy See, which I wish solemnly to thank once again for their support in helping to organize that Conference.

Many personalities attended the Rome Conference, including Mr. Francesco Rutelli, the mayor of Rome; Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs and representative of the Secretary-General of our Organization; Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, President of the Central Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and head of the delegation of the Holy See; Mr. Jacques Baudin, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Senegal; Mr. Azeddine Laraki, Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference; Mr. Jacques Diouf, Director General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization; and Mr. Lamberto Dini, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Italy.

The eminent personalities who spoke at the Conference included Mr. Luciano Violante, President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, and Mr. Domenico Fisichella, Senator and Vice-President of the Italian Senate and representative of Nicola Mancino, President of the Italian Senate. The Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and President of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, also made an important statement.

In Rome, Mr. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, then President of the Republic of Italy, received the Committee delegation and expressed the readiness of his country to continue to make every effort to revive the peace process. The delegation also had an audience with His Holiness Pope John Paul II, who welcomed the Committee's activities and sent his best wishes for the success of the events soon to be held in Bethlehem.

The Committee continued to increase its support for the project by organizing other activities, in particular an international meeting in Windhoek, Namibia, in April 1999, as well as meetings with representatives of the European Union, the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the League of Arab States. I should like to take this opportunity to thank you, Mr. President, for your personal contribution to the success of the Windhoek meeting.

An exhibition entitled "Bethlehem 2000", which includes works of art and photographs of Bethlehem, was organized to commemorate the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People on 29 November 1998, at United Nations Headquarters. The exhibition was also on view during the meetings in Rome and Windhoek. On the occasion of the next International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, which will be commemorated at the end of this month, the Committee will present another exhibition of Palestinian art, also on the subject of Bethlehem 2000. The exhibition will be entitled "Follow the Star: Images from the Palestinian City of Bethlehem at the New Millennium", and it will be officially opened on 29 November at 6 p.m.

For its part, the United Nations system has played a pre-eminent role since the launching of the Bethlehem 2000 project in 1997. The United Nations Development Programme is continuing to participate in a wide range of projects to repair infrastructure and to develop the tourist industry in close cooperation with the municipality of Bethlehem. The World Bank and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization are continuing to play an active part in the project through specific initiatives in the area. The European Commission, non-governmental organizations, donor countries and individuals have made substantial contributions, which have enabled the preparatory work to be finalized in time for the launch of the festivities.

At a time when the world will soon be flooding into Bethlehem, and at a time when the Palestinian people are preparing a generous welcome for all visitors, the Committee hopes that many will respond to the invitation and come to celebrate in peace and hope the birth of Jesus Christ in the Palestinian city of Bethlehem. All are welcome in Bethlehem, that place of pilgrimage where the past and the present meet. In Bethlehem we will honour the heritage of a rich culture and a magnificent

history with millennial traditions. In Bethlehem we will also be able to imagine a future that holds promise for all the peoples of the region — a region that must preserve its role as a crossroads for coming together and for peace for all people of goodwill.

On behalf of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, I now have the honour to introduce draft resolution A/54/L.20, entitled "Bethlehem 2000". In addition to those named in the document, the following countries have also decided to sponsor the draft resolution: France, Guinea, Malta, Namibia, Norway, Portugal, the Russian Federation, San Marino, Spain, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ukraine and Venezuela.

In the draft resolution, the General Assembly welcomes the impending arrival of the historic event which will commemorate both the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem and the beginning of the third millennium in the city which is a symbol of the shared hope for peace among all the peoples of the world. The Assembly then expresses its support for the Bethlehem 2000 project and commends the efforts undertaken by the Palestinian Authority in this regard. It notes with appreciation the assistance already given by the international community in support of the Bethlehem 2000 project and calls for the further increase of assistance and engagement on the part of the international community in order to ensure the complete success of the project.

The draft also requests the Secretary-General to mobilize the pertinent organizations and agencies of the United Nations system to increase their efforts to ensure the success of the project, and decides to include in the provisional agenda of its fifty-fifth session the item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" so that the Assembly may continue to support the project until the commemoration comes to a close at Easter 2001.

Allow me to express the profound gratitude of the Committee to Governments, United Nations bodies, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and the sponsors of this important draft resolution. Their generosity and contribution will enable the Palestinian people to fulfil one of their dreams and one of their aspirations. Let us all dare to hope that the celebration of Bethlehem 2000 will enable us to lay the foundations for lasting peace that will endure beyond the festivities, and that it will embody the hope, at the dawn of the next millennium and for years to come, of harmonious coexistence among all the peoples of the region.

In conclusion, allow me also to express the hope that, as was the case last year, all Members will give their unreserved support to this draft resolution and that once again it will be adopted by consensus.

The President: I should like to inform members that, in a letter dated 5 October 1999 addressed to the President of the General Assembly, the Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations, in his capacity as Chairman of the Group of Western European and other States for the month of October, requests that the General Assembly hear in plenary meeting a statement by the observer of the Holy See on agenda item 36, "Bethlehem 2000".

Taking into account the importance attached to the issue under discussion, it is proposed that the General Assembly should take a decision on that request.

May I take it that there is no objection to the proposal to hear a statement by the observer of the Holy See?

It was so decided.

Mr. Al-Kidwa (Palestine) (*spoke in Arabic*): The Palestinian city of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, is on the threshold of its millennium commemoration, Bethlehem 2000. The forthcoming worldwide celebration of this epic turning point in time is an occasion imbued with profound historical, religious, spiritual and cultural dimensions of high importance for our people, for the other peoples of the region, for the faithful and for the entire international community. Bethlehem, Palestine, is of great historic and symbolic centrality in these celebrations. There, the world will rejoice in the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus and will welcome a new millennium. The General Assembly's consensus adoption of resolution 53/27, the first under this item, was a reflection of both the prominence of the issue and the profound significance and meaning of the occasion.

A dignified, glorious and celebratory commemoration befitting such a historic and momentous occasion is of paramount importance and has been a central priority since the inauguration of the Bethlehem 2000 project in March 1997. In this regard, the organization and preparations for the celebration of this occasion in Bethlehem constitute an enormous endeavour that the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Authority have undertaken with great pleasure.

Throughout the past year, serious work has been carried out in connection with the Bethlehem 2000 project in spite of the persistent difficulties on the ground caused by the occupation. The most recent examples include the killing of a Palestinian man by an Israeli soldier in Bethlehem and recent plans by Israel, the occupying Power, to establish a border-like checkpoint at the entrance to the city. All the work that has been achieved despite such obstacles reflects the resilience of the Palestinian people and their determination to ensure the success of this commemoration. The atmosphere in and around Bethlehem has already begun to feel different, and there is an enthusiastic readiness to receive the 2 million pilgrims and tourists expected to join in the celebrations and events beginning just prior to Christmas, 1999, continuing throughout 2000 and concluding on Easter, 2001.

The international donor community has also been engaged in the preparations. This includes the United Nations community, particularly the United Nations Development Programme. We also express our deep appreciation for the work and efforts of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People over the past year in this regard. In addition to the initiative it has undertaken with regard to Bethlehem 2000, the Committee will also sponsor the annual exhibit on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, presented in cooperation with our Mission. This year's exhibit is entitled "Follow the star: Images from the Palestinian city of Bethlehem at the new millennium".

This year, the Committee organized a very successful Bethlehem 2000 International Conference in Rome in February. The Conference had the full support and participation of Palestine, Italy, the Holy See, church authorities, the European Commission, the United Nations system and various other international organizations, institutions and non-governmental organizations, as well as of individuals from the academic, cultural and private sectors. Upon its conclusion, the Conference adopted the Rome Declaration on Bethlehem 2000, in which it reaffirmed, *inter alia*, the international community's support for the success of the occasion and expressed appreciation for the funding and assistance provided by the donor community, particularly donor countries, agencies and the private sector.

I would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude and appreciation to all those who have made generous contributions towards this endeavour and who have cooperated with the Palestinian Authority in its effort to ensure the jubilant success of Bethlehem 2000. Continued participation by the international community is, of course, essential. As for the role of the United Nations in this regard, it is our hope that the Organization will continue to play an important role in drawing the attention of the peoples of the world to the importance of this historic universal occasion.

The Palestinian people are proud and honoured to be hosting such a historic occasion, one that we hope will reflect and promote a vision of peace, reconciliation and goodwill for all humankind. We had truly hoped to begin the Bethlehem 2000 celebrations in an independent Palestine. Of course, we are disappointed that this will not be the case. However, we are confident that the second portion of this occasion, including Christmas, 2000, the start of 2001 and the conclusion of the commemorations on Easter, 2001, will be celebrated in an independent Palestine and a peaceful Middle East.

The unanimous adoption of resolution 53/27 by the Assembly during the fifty-third session was hailed by the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference in Rome as a clear reflection of the world community's strong desire to bring an era of dialogue, tolerance and reconciliation to the people of Bethlehem and the entire Middle East. It is our fervent hope that the draft resolution under this item will also receive the support of all the Member States of this Assembly and be adopted by consensus.

Ms. Rasi (Finland): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. The Central and Eastern European countries associated with the European Union — Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia — and the associated countries Cyprus and Malta, align themselves with this statement.

The European Union is particularly pleased to make a statement on a Middle East agenda item and the draft resolution that has an overwhelmingly positive message which can help unite the region in a true celebration. Such a message is most welcome.

The European Union wholeheartedly supports the Bethlehem 2000 project initiated by the Palestinian Authority, the Municipality of Bethlehem and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with a view to preparing the ancient City of Bethlehem for the start of the new millennium.

The project aims at restoring historical, archaeological and religious sites of unique importance. It also seeks to improve tourist facilities in order to establish Bethlehem as a major tourist destination far beyond the 15-month-long millennium celebration. These development projects, together with numerous others initiated by non-governmental organizations, contribute to the economic growth and development of the whole Bethlehem region.

In May 1998, a conference on Bethlehem 2000 was convened in Brussels in association with the European Commission, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNESCO and the World Bank. The purpose of the conference, for which the European Commission provided logistical support, was to engender the necessary financial commitments from official sources, private donors and potential investors in the private sector. The conference concluded with a series of important pledges to the project.

In February 1999, another international preparatory Bethlehem 2000 conference was held in Rome under the auspices of the United Nations and with the support of the Italian Government. The two-day forum was convened in order to mobilize the widest international support for the Bethlehem 2000 project and its vision of peace and reconciliation. Again, the European Union participated actively in the proceedings.

It is the view of the European Union that development of the tourist sector should be promoted as a priority. It is clearly one of the keys to economic growth in the Bethlehem region. The European Union therefore strongly encourages, in the context of Bethlehem 2000, close coordination and cooperation locally and with the international donor community.

The European Union is providing financial support for Bethlehem 2000 as well as for specific projects such as expansion of the facilities of the nearby Beit Jalla hospital and the renovation of the old city's Manger Square. The European Commission provides support for the upgrading of the infrastructure network.

The major religious, historic and cultural dimensions of the event will require unimpeded access to the holy places in Bethlehem for all those wishing to celebrate the new millennium in this historic city. The United Nations and the whole world will celebrate the new millennium, a celebration which will culminate in the Jubilee ceremonies in Rome on 5 November 2000.

Before concluding, I would like to take this opportunity to express the European Union's appreciation to the Permanent Representative of Senegal, Ambassador Ibra Deguène Ka, for his strenuous efforts to promote the Bethlehem 2000 project.

Last but not least, the European Union reaffirms its firm commitment to a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) and all the subsequent achievements of the Middle East peace process. Recognizing the importance of a sound economy to social and political stability, the European Union will continue its considerable economic and technical assistance to the Palestinians with a view to contributing to a more secure and prosperous future for them in the next millennium.

Mr. Jasmi (Malaysia): The Bethlehem 2000 project, a monumental event to celebrate the new millennium in Bethlehem in a global vision of peace and reconciliation, will commence this Christmas. My delegation views this celebration as not just to welcome the advent of the third millennium but also as a renewal of faith, hope and peace for the peoples of the world, in particular the Palestinian people. We want to see this celebration as an opportunity for building peace and stability in the region and as a springboard or catalyst for economic rehabilitation and development for the historic city and its surrounding area.

My delegation notes the report of the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference, convened in Rome last February, and is gratified that much progress had been made to achieve the objectives of this project. We commend the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for its efforts in promoting the Bethlehem 2000 project in support of the initiative by the Palestinian National Authority.

We also wish to record our appreciation for the work of the United Nations agencies like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for their cooperation with the Palestinian Authority and the Bethlehem municipality in the restoration and preservation works of the city. My delegation recognises the contributions made by Governments, intergovernmental bodies and the private sectors to the project.

We also thank the international financial institutions like the World Bank and the international donor community for providing the funds needed to carry out the project. However, as mentioned by the coordinator of the project, financial and technical help are still needed. We therefore hope that there will be additional offers of international assistance and support to ensure the success of this project.

My delegation believes that the Bethlehem 2000 project is not just for the Palestinian people. The city of Bethlehem is one of the most historic and religiously significant sites on earth, visited by thousands of pilgrims and tourists every year. The infrastructure-building project will help to cater to the needs of the roughly 2 million visitors expected next year, and it is also badly needed by the 125,000 or more people who live in Bethlehem. Improvements in the roads and in the water, electricity, sewage and waste-management systems will help to ameliorate the living conditions in this city of great historical and religious importance.

The Bethlehem 2000 project has given the international community a chance to participate in a project of international religious, cultural and historical significance. International participation in this project would reinforce the culture of peace, tolerance and forgiveness, and provide renewed vigour to the push for peace in the region. We believe lasting peace can be achieved only through the exercise by the Palestinian people of their right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent State of Palestine.

My delegation is pleased to co-sponsor this draft resolution. We earnestly hope it will be adopted unanimously by the Assembly as a manifestation of universal support for this project and of the hope for a lasting peace for Palestine and the region.

Mr. Aboul Gheit (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): Next year will be a year of celebrations for Christians throughout the world. They will be commemorating the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. All peace-loving people will be taking part in these celebrations which will be held in the historic city of Bethlehem. Naturally, the commemoration of Jesus Christ's birth is of religious and historic importance, not only for the Palestinian people but for the whole world. These festivities, now being prepared in the city of Bethlehem, will bring together, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance, peaceful coexistence and hope, representatives of religious authorities, peoples, individuals and institutions from around the world. The spirit of peace, of which Jesus Christ is a symbol, will be a message for the whole world. We will all try to promote this message of peace in the Middle East region.

Egypt is aware of the intensive efforts that the Palestinian Authority has made in preparing for this commemoration. Egypt believes that the support provide to the Palestinians by the United Nations, the specialized agencies and Member States will have a profound impact on the success of the festivities. For this event to be successful, there needs to be an upgrading of Bethlehem's infrastructure — including its water, electricity and health-services facilities — and of basic social services, such as medical, police and transportation services. This endeavour must also include the implementation of plans to provide basic services for the more than 2 million visitors and tourists who are expected in Bethlehem for the commemoration of this historic event.

Egypt wishes to express its gratitude for the aid provided by various donors to the Bethlehem 2000 project. On behalf of my delegation, I would like to express the hope that this aid, particularly that coming from the private sector, will continue. Moreover, we are counting on the support of the Secretary-General to mobilize the relevant United Nations agencies and bodies to provide the support necessary for the success of these festivities.

Egypt hopes that the Israeli authorities will provide additional cooperation and show increased flexibility in order to create the necessary conditions for the channelling of international aid to the organizers of this event. Israeli actions should include the elimination of any obstacles to unrestricted circulation and unrestricted access to the holy sites in this historic city. We also hope that the peaceful settlement of the Palestinian question will be sped up so that the festivities can take place in an atmosphere of desired peace.

The draft resolution before the Assembly today, co-sponsored by Egypt, reflects the importance with which the international community views this magnificent event. The parties concerned have urged that this draft resolution be adopted by consensus for the second straight year. This appeal reflects everyone's desire to create an atmosphere conducive to Bethlehem's inauguration of the third Christian millennium.

In conclusion, I cannot fail to reaffirm that the Government of Egypt and its religious and cultural institutions will contribute to making the festivities of

Bethlehem 2000 a success. Our participation in these festivities is commensurate with the importance that we accord to this great historic event.

Mr. Kumalo (South Africa): On the eve of the third millennium, the great, holy and historic city of Bethlehem will launch a universal celebration of peace and hope in Palestine. Given the momentous worldwide religious and historic significance of this event and its vital importance to the Palestinian people and to the people of the region, it is incumbent upon the United Nations to continue to support and fully participate in the Bethlehem 2000 project, which will commence at Christmas, 1999, and conclude at Easter, 2001. These important celebrations will last for more than an entire year. We commend President Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority for their efforts in launching the project.

At the invitation of President Arafat, world leaders, including former South African President Nelson Mandela, agreed to participate in the international Bethlehem 2000 Committee. This attests to the vital significance South Africa attaches and will continue to attach to this international event.

At the Ministerial Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement held in September this year in New York, the Ministers reaffirmed their support for the Bethlehem 2000 project in the Palestinian city of Bethlehem and expressed confidence that the increased assistance and engagement of the international community will ensure the successful commemoration of the event. We commend the bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, under the able leadership of Ambassador Ibra Ka of Senegal, for promoting this very important initiative.

The successful implementation of the Bethlehem 2000 project has the potential to become a catalyst for a new era of peace, reconciliation and the promotion of dialogue. President Arafat, in his address to the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference in Rome, hosted by the Government of Italy in February 1999, stated that:

> "From Bethlehem, as of the first moment of the third millennium, we shall send a call of peace to all the peoples of the world, a call for security to all the peoples, and a call for the dedication of all efforts and resources to building and development instead of violence, occupation and conflict".

Continued financial assistance from the international community for the Bethlehem 2000 project is needed for the creation of a strong, self-sufficient and sustainable economic infrastructure for Bethlehem that would provide a sound underpinning for social and political stability, which is a prerequisite for peace in the region.

As part of the project, preparations are under way to renovate the historic city of Bethlehem in order to preserve its heritage and restore its splendour. We must reverse the ravaging effects of poverty on this city. Time has taken its toll on this great city. The decades of conflict have also left their scars on this city. The international community must at least ensure that Bethlehem has all the necessary facilities for the growing population that calls it home.

An important objective of the project is to enhance the attraction of Bethlehem to tourists and pilgrims during this period and to contribute to the promotion of a wider goal for the region: that of Bethlehem as a major tourist venue.

We commend the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank and other United Nations organizations and agencies which will play an important role in ensuring the success of this major undertaking. This project warrants the support of the entire international community. Furthermore, we join in supporting the Secretary-General in his continuing efforts to mobilize the relevant United Nations organizations and agencies in this regard. Financial commitments have also been received from donor countries and non-governmental organizations.

However, it must be emphasized that success will not be attained if believers of all faiths, citizens of all nationalities and visitors from around the world participating in this celebration do not have unimpeded access to activities.

South Africa firmly believes that the peace process is the only means of ensuring lasting peace, security and stability in the region. After the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum in September, the South African Government congratulated the Israeli and Palestinian sides, commending them on this significant development and adding that, while the path towards a final status agreement would be a difficult one indeed, the agreement reached at Sharm el-Sheikh boded well for the type of

cooperation which alone could result in the achievement of a just and lasting peace.

It is indeed our fervent hope that the current peace process towards reaching a final settlement between the Israeli and Palestinian sides will continue with renewed vigour, thereby contributing to the celebration of the Bethlehem 2000 project in a spirit of peace, tolerance and reconciliation.

Ms. Matlary (Norway): I am very pleased to make a statement on agenda item 36, "Bethlehem 2000". The initiative taken by the Palestinian Authority, the municipality of Bethlehem and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to establish the Bethlehem 2000 project was much appreciated by my Government. Many others have contributed to the promotion of this valuable project and I would like to take this opportunity to extend a word of appreciation to the Permanent Representative of Senegal, Ambassador Ibra Deguène Ka, for his tireless efforts to promote Bethlehem.

The celebration of the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ and the beginning of the new millennium is of great importance not only to the Palestinian people and the region, but also to members of the international community. Christ's message was one of radical solidarity between all human beings. "Am I my brother's keeper?". The answer is yes. Genuine peace is conditional on respect for all and love for all. This is indeed a tall order, given our natural inclination to selfishness, but it is not an unattainable goal. It is up to us to choose peace. As we stand at the threshold of a new millennium, it is our responsibility to help the ancient city of Bethlehem preserve its historical heritage and secure its place as a symbol of peace and reconciliation for future generations.

The Bethlehem 2000 project is an ambitious programme of cultural and religious celebration. It is, at the same time, a project for urban and economic rejuvenation and tourist development and promotion. We expect it to make a lasting contribution to economic growth and social development in the Bethlehem region. The further potential for tourism in the region is very significant and the project should make an important contribution to the effort to further increase the popularity of Bethlehem as a tourist destination. Economic growth and social development are important elements in our common efforts to contribute to this peace in the Middle East.

This is the background for Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik's decision to join the Bethlehem 2000 International Committee, along with other state leaders. Norway is proud of its association with the Bethlehem 2000 project. Norway welcomes the call for a strong and increased international engagement with the project. Norway views Bethlehem 2000 as an opportunity to broaden the donor nations' commitment to reconciliation and peace in the Middle East. It is also an opportunity to focus on the reconstruction and development efforts of the Palestinians.

Norway is pleased to be able to participate in the preparations for the celebration, and we are supporting the effort with approximately $5 million in 1998 and 1999. These funds are earmarked particularly for rehabilitation work in the Old City and neighbouring municipalities. We encourage other donors to step up their efforts to support this important project.

Norway is planning several cultural and religious events during the 16 months of celebration. These will take place not only in Bethlehem, but also in other cities in the Palestinian area.

It is our hope that the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ will inspire us all to work for peace and reconciliation, based on his call for tolerance, respect and love for one's neighbours.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

Mr. Fulci (Italy): Allow me to add some considerations to the statement already made by the Permanent Representative of Finland on behalf of the European Union, which we fully endorse.

Italy has witnessed with concern the tensions and difficulties experienced by the Middle East in recent years. The geographic proximity of my country to the region, and our historical and cultural links with it, make us particularly sensitive to crises in that part of the world.

This explains why my country has always tried to foster every initiative aimed at restoring peace and good relations in the area, while assisting peoples that have suffered divisions, confrontations and conflicts year after year.

The idea of celebrating the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem has

appeared to us to be an initiative of special significance ever since it was first announced in 1997, which was exactly the year when the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority came to a stalemate.

A series of initiatives had to be launched — on the one hand to press for renewed dialogue and mutual understanding, and on the other to promote solidarity and a concrete commitment from the international community to the people of the region. Italy was one of the very first to assure a substantial contribution to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization for drafting and implementing a concrete plan. To this end, almost $3 million has been pledged by the Government of Italy.

In addition, on 18 and 19 February of this year, Rome hosted a second preparatory Conference, after that of Brussels, with the participation of numerous countries, United Nations agencies and governmental and non-governmental organizations. President Arafat deserves our gratitude for attending the event personally and for the new message of peace that he launched from Rome. Likewise, we owe thanks to the Foreign Minister of Senegal, Mr. Jacques Baudin, and to his country's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Ibra Deguène Ka, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, for his dedication and considerable achievements.

Rather than chance, it was the hand of history that allowed the Bethlehem 2000 celebrations to occur at a moment of great hope for the achievement of a definitive and just peace in the Middle East.

In our opinion, at least two other aspects of the Bethlehem 2000 project deserve mention. The first is the universal message of peace that it embodies. Bethlehem 2000 aims to help the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, but in a broader perspective it is part of the dialogue among civilizations that the General Assembly has once again inserted into this year's agenda. Rather than just an occasion to celebrate a meeting between countries and Governments, Bethlehem 2000 is meant to be an invitation to dialogue — dialogue among peoples and cultures — and, above all, between the three great monotheistic religions that originated in the Holy Land.

We should all appreciate the universal message of an event that invites every population in every corner of the world to reflect, at the beginning of the third millennium, on shared moral and social values and the common aspiration to peace and mutual understanding.

The simultaneous celebration of the great jubilee in Rome, originating in the ancient traditions of the Catholic Church, moves in the same direction, sending from The Eternal City an identical message of concord and brotherhood to all the peoples of the world.

The celebration of Bethlehem 2000 also calls for some pragmatic, but no less important, considerations. I am referring to the economic initiatives that are an integral part of the project. We all know that this is a time at which international conferences, congresses, symposia, meetings and celebrations of all kinds are being held everywhere. Most of these events will not have lasting consequences, despite their costs in the tens, if not in the hundreds, of millions of dollars. Rarely have resources thus employed had a lasting impact on local economies: we get accustomed to spending enormous amounts of money to talk about poverty, for instance, but at the same time the poor are too often left only with piles of new reports, new studies and new papers.

On the other hand, Bethlehem 2000 is conceived not just as a series of cultural events but also as a concrete means of promoting tourism to Palestine, creating new hospitality structures, recovering the archaeological heritage and local culture and strengthening civil infrastructures. It constitutes a form of genuine assistance to the people and to all those who visit the birthplace of Christ every year. The effect of the celebrations is not meant to end next year, but instead to continue to be reflected on the lives of tens of thousands of people.

Here we have an example that should help us reflect on the many celebrations and gatherings that we are about to initiate. Like Bethlehem 2000, these should all have concrete follow-up and not be an end in themselves. This is why the movers and doers involved in this project should be sincerely commended for their efforts, in which we wish them every success.

Mr. Filippi Balestra (San Marino): The Republic of San Marino attaches great importance to the initiative entitled "Bethlehem 2000", launched by the Palestinian Authority in 1997.

My country has consistently followed the tormented issues that have characterized the more general question of the search for peace in the region of the Middle East, and we welcome the results of the peace negotiations

although we note that there is still a long way to go. We assure the Assembly of our contribution to endeavours to overcome division and conflict, the avoidance of violence and abuse and the promotion of the choice of dialogue and negotiations towards equitable and peaceful solutions among the parties involved. Those solutions will have to be reached with respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms of all peoples and of all individuals living in the region.

Bethlehem 2000 was born in this context and with this aim. It represents a unique opportunity to join hands in a spirit of dialogue, reconciliation, forgiveness, coexistence and peace.

For this reason, San Marino believes that it is essential that such a project, aimed at the restoration of historic religious sites in Bethlehem and its infrastructure be completed before the event takes place.

General Assembly resolution 53/27, adopted by consensus, represents clear evidence of the world community's desire to bring about a new era of dialogue and reconciliation in the region, and we strongly hope that this new era coincides with the beginning of the new millennium.

San Marino followed with great attention the work of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. We admire and cherish the work of its Chairman and its members. We took active part in the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference, organized in cooperation with the Italian Government and the Holy See, and we welcome the adoption of the Rome Declaration, which emphasized the need to bring economic recovery and prosperity to the Palestinian people.

San Marino wishes to take part in this important and significant event with a concrete contribution in keeping with its traditional vocation of solidarity and peace.

We are aware that Bethlehem is not only a city of holy places, but also a place where people have to live. Reliable infrastructure, such as health-care, educational and residential and commercial facilities, is needed. People from Bethlehem have the right to fulfil their needs and expectations just like those living in any other city in the world.

This is the reason why our Republic, having always paid particular attention to social and humanitarian interventions in favour of war-stricken children or suffering and needy populations, decided to finance a project entailing the creation infrastructures for children. We are currently defining the practical aspects and the size of this project.

This initiative represents for us a meaningful sign of the solidarity of the San Marino Government and people and an invitation to continue to strengthen the efforts towards peace and peaceful coexistence in the region.

With the hope that such values will find more and more support, San Marino cherishes all international efforts, and especially the significant role of the United Nations.

Mr. Rodríguez-Parrilla (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): As the twentieth century and the second millennium are drawing to a close, the world's peoples are renewing their hope of achieving the ideals of peace and understanding to which we all aspire.

In this context, any initiative that in one way or another promotes the process of peace and reconciliation in the Middle East should be given our complete support, and this is why, in the view of our delegation, the item under consideration today, "Bethlehem 2000", is of extraordinary importance.

Undoubtedly, the city of Bethlehem is, historically, culturally and religiously, one of the richest places in the world. In the year 2000, the past and the future will converge there, with hope for a world free of hatred, a world of solidarity and cooperation.

That celebration in Bethlehem will be of extraordinary importance not only to Palestine and the Middle East, but also to the entire international community. The fact that over 2 million visitors will surely arrive in Bethlehem for the occasion and the massive preparations that this will require, make it clear that we must all work for the success of this monumental project.

Unfortunately, the city of Bethlehem, like other Palestinian cities, has suffered serious damage to its infrastructure as a result of years of occupation. It is for this reason that if we want the commemoration truly to lead us to a process of reflection and action in the search for peace for all peoples of the world without exception, it is essential that unconditional support be given to this event. We are pleased to confirm that a number of United Nations organs and programmes, as well as

various intergovernmental organizations, have already made financial and technical contributions to the preparations, and we hope that there will be more such efforts in the immediate future.

Cuba completely shares the wish for a solution to be found to the problems of the Middle East, and this inevitably includes a definitive solution to the Palestinian problem, which constitutes its cornerstone.

The Bethlehem 2000 initiative comes at a crucial point in the evolution of the conflict in the Middle East. We hope that the celebrations will further strengthen the forces of cooperation and justice and that this will have a positive effect on the peace process. The question of Palestine is at a particularly complex point. In spite of concrete advances in the negotiating process, a great deal remains to be done for the attainment of a lasting and satisfactory solution for the noble and valiant people of Palestine and for the rest of the peoples that live in the Arab territories under occupation. We are convinced that Bethlehem 2000 will be a very important step along that path.

We also hope that the celebrations will be of economic benefit to the Palestinian people, which needs such benefits in order to advance the process of reconstruction and the establishment of a new infrastructure and a solid basis for their economy.

I do not wish to conclude without expressing our satisfaction at the results obtained by the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference, which was held in Rome on 18 and 19 February 1999, at which personalities from all over the world met in the capital of Italy to review, *inter alia*, the preparations and the requirements of this important occasion.

For my delegation it is a real honour to have joined in sponsoring draft resolution A/54/L.20, which is now before the Assembly for consideration and which reflects the will and the desire of the international community to advance towards its noble objectives.

I wish to urge all delegations to work together and to join in the consensus on this historic project, which will strengthen our message of fraternity and peace.

Please be assured that the Cuban Government will work for the success of the Bethlehem 2000 project.

Bethlehem is a city of peace. The gathering of thousands of people from many nations and religions, coming with sincere intentions and a true desire to achieve self-improvement, can only consolidate peace in the world. Thus, a spiritual union will occur between hundreds of thousands of people coming from distant places all over the world to visit Bethlehem. Believers in the religion of Abraham will share in this blessed event. Followers of different faiths will surely respect what is considered blessed by a large part of mankind, for all human beings, irrespective of their religious beliefs, are brothers and sisters.

Together with Chairman Ka and other members of the Bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, I had the honour of participating in the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference, which was held in Rome on 18 and 19 February 1999, where representatives of many religious communities were present. I was fortunate enough to be able to perceive beforehand a feeling of just how much Bethlehem 2000 would serve regional and world peace when it is celebrated in the Holy Land.

This celebration coincides with the emergence of hope for swift and substantial progress in the Middle East peace process, leading to a final settlement between the Palestinian and Israeli sides in the course of the year 2000. This is why the draft resolution welcomes the impending global, historic celebration in Bethlehem of the birth of Jesus Christ. The new millennium must be celebrated in a manner befitting an atmosphere conducive to peace, reconciliation, concord and harmony. This draft resolution, with all the lofty values it contains, deserves to be unanimously adopted without a vote.

Mr. Moushoutas (Cyprus): The item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" was inscribed on the agenda of the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly in accordance with resolution 53/27 so that we could be given the opportunity to reaffirm our support for the historic commemoration immediately prior to the occasion.

We are now witnessing the fading away of the twentieth century, and we are at the threshold of the third millennium. In welcoming the impending global celebration in Bethlehem, we inevitably reflect upon the past and ponder the future. We call to mind the humble birth in Bethlehem of Jesus, who, as the Nuncio has told us, is identified with the weak, the rootless and the persecuted and who undertook to liberate man from man and man from himself. His teachings of mercy, compassion and forgiveness are legacies for all mankind.

We think of our own unending struggle to secure peace and justice, measuring our limited successes and, at the same time, counting our failures. They are too numerous to be overlooked. We wonder what the results might have been if we had followed the road of understanding and compassion. Bethlehem 2000 gives us the opportunity to ponder and to reassess.

Bethlehem, Palestine, is geographically close to Cyprus. It is even closer spiritually and sentimentally. The millennium event is of paramount importance to us, as it is for the whole of mankind. Situated as we are at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, we are directly affected by any developments in the region, whether they are developments of peace or of conflict. We therefore welcome the rejuvenation of the peace process. It is our earnest hope that it will produce final, positive results so that the peoples of the area may at last embark on a future of peace and reconstruction. Bethlehem 2000 can be an important contribution to that end. It can positively affect the peace process, especially now that the winds of peace are again sweeping over the region and carrying the voices, loud and clear, of reconciliation.

No effort should be spared in the pursuit of a comprehensive, final and just solution to the problems of the Middle East. Their successful conclusion on the basis of the relevant Security Council resolutions will benefit the peoples of the region — including the people of Cyprus, who live with the vision of a free, united and peaceful island, without foreign troops and barbed wire and with its people integrated and cooperating as they did for centuries in the past.

We commend the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and its Chairman, the Ambassador of Senegal, for taking the initiative to commemorate this event. We view it as a step of participation by the international community in the ongoing peace process and a reflection of the world's strong desire to bring an era of dialogue, tolerance and reconciliation both to the people of Bethlehem and to the entire Middle East.

Care must be taken in the organizational aspects of this historical and religious event. With 2 million tourists expected to visit the area, freedom of movement and unhindered safe access to the Holy Places by the faithful of all religions and nationalities must be assured. The Holy Land must be just that: holy, a place of harmony, peace and hope. The success of the project will pave the way for establishing the Palestinian territories as a major tourist destination in the Middle East well after the celebration of the year 2000.

In reiterating our full support for this historic event, we commend the Palestinian authorities for the important work they are carrying out with the assistance of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the World Bank and other United Nations organizations to ensure the success of this global celebration. We also commend the international donors, whose contributions will ensure a successful outcome of this endeavour so dear to the hearts of millions and millions of people.

Mr. Wibisono (Indonesia): The item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" is being considered by the General Assembly at an auspicious moment in history. We would like to express our gratitude to the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, under the leadership of Mr. Ka of Senegal, for its contributions and for mobilizing international support for this noble endeavour. Our deliberations today send a resounding message of peace, in accordance with the long-cherished aspirations of the Palestinian people, and indeed of all the people of the region, for the achievement of peace and prosperity in the Middle East.

Indonesia fully supports the inclusion of the item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" and deems it a distinct pleasure once again to be a co-sponsor of the draft resolution on this question. We were also gratified to have participated in the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference, held in Rome on 18 and 19 February 1999. Its convening was important, as it provided an opportunity for a useful exchange of views towards finding the best possible approaches to implementing the project.

The commemoration of the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem and the heralding of the third millennium deserve our full support. The holding of this monumental and historic event in this holy Palestinian city is most relevant and appropriate, as it symbolizes the shared hopes for peace among all peoples in the world. In this cradle of the world's religions, Jesus Christ, Prophet Mohammed and other great Prophets preached the message of peace and tolerance to mankind. Therefore this project should be one of participation, not only for the Palestinian people but also for the entire international community.

There could be no better place in the world than this holy site to usher in a new millennium with expectations for peace and justice for future generations. Besides its profound historical, religious and cultural dimensions, the project has great significance for the economic and social development of the Palestinians. Bethlehem should be the shining star in a free and independent Palestine, where the yearning of a whole people for freedom and independence will soon become a reality. It should mark the beginning of a period of coexistence and reconciliation of the peoples in the region, and a starting point for a peaceful and harmonious future. Towards this end, our efforts are necessary to improve the infrastructure of the ancient city of Bethlehem, so that it can be restored to its former glory and splendour, thereby promoting tourism for the nascent Palestinian state. We await the commencement of interesting events, which will begin at Christmas 1999 and continue until Easter 2001.

We laud the untiring efforts of the Palestinian National Authority, under President Yasser Arafat, to make this event momentous for the international community. It also offers an opportunity to foster a closer understanding of different cultures and religious beliefs, thereby putting an end to decades of mistrust and misunderstanding. It is an occasion for all to come together and place aspects of life and faith in the appropriate perspective. It bolsters our hopes and expectations of a reinvigorated climate of amity, mutual trust and understanding among all peoples, irrespective of race, creed or religion. This era of peace can take root and flourish only if the Palestinian people exercise their inalienable rights to self-determination and independence, with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as their capital.

Hence we should send a message from Bethlehem to all peoples around the globe for stable peace and common security, as well as a call for dedicated efforts to economic, social and cultural development, while relegating violence, occupation and conflict to a tragic chapter of Palestinian history. We should therefore spare no effort to ensure the success of this historic event of universal significance so that it can be a celebration of our collective aspirations for enduring harmony among peoples and nations.

Mr. Mabilangan (Philippines): Much has happened and much has been done since we first considered this agenda item at our previous session. United Nations agencies, Governments, the private sector and other members of civil society have come together and focused their creative energies, time and resources on the meaningful realization of the Bethlehem 2000 project.

The Philippines would like to credit the Palestinian Authority, the municipality of Bethlehem and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for initiating and taking the lead on this project. We would also like to express to them the appreciation of a grateful people for allowing us to share in this sacred and blessed event.

Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus Christ, as well as the onset of the new millennium, are of monumental importance and have deep significance for a great many people. The Philippines, far as it is from Bethlehem, feels a closeness and oneness with everyone commemorating this event. The Philippines has warmly welcomed the Bethlehem 2000 project and, fully aware of the dedication and commitment of the people and organizations behind it, is certain of its success.

We knew early on that Bethlehem 2000 would receive the fullest support, not only because we all sincerely cherish the unique historical, cultural and religious significance of Bethlehem, but also because the commemoration of Bethlehem 2000 will bring the world to one place to renew our common commitment to peace, tolerance and understanding — not just for the moment when the third millennium begins or for the duration of the celebrations, but for all time.

The draft resolution before us calls on the international community to support the Bethlehem 2000 project. This is no easy task, as the amounts involved are rather large. It is indeed daunting to think of the preparation and work involved, but with everyone giving a helping hand, the success of Bethlehem 2000 should be ensured. The universality and importance of this project, and the desire of all to see it succeed, will ensure that the project will not lack support.

Today we feel increasingly convinced about, and sense the urgency of, supporting Bethlehem 2000. We recognize and support the importance of reconstructing the historic sites of the Holy Land, of preserving the historic and religious importance of Bethlehem and of instilling a spirit of harmony and solidarity in the peoples of that area, and indeed of the Middle East. We also believe that the Bethlehem 2000 project has a distinct spiritual value, over and above other important economic concerns, and that this event, which commemorates the birth of Christ, must be shielded from harmful and unnecessary political hindrances that could frustrate its legitimate goal. Let us all help in promoting and

honouring mankind's sacred benefactor, born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago.

At the beginning of my statement I said that much has been achieved since we last discussed Bethlehem 2000. But much more remains to be done. The peace process has moved forward, but reconciliation and enduring peace have been elusive. The commemoration of the arrival of the messenger of peace will be even more meaningful if we ourselves bring peace, justice, dignity and reconciliation to the people of Palestine and to the Middle East.

The historical, archaeological and religious sites in Bethlehem bear witness not only to the birth of Jesus Christ but also to the struggles and sacrifices of a brave and persevering people and their quest for peace. As we move to preserve these sites, we must also exert every effort to leave a testament of peace and understanding in the Middle East.

Before concluding, may I commend and express our appreciation to the Permanent Representative of Senegal, Ambassador Ibra Ka, for his and his group's untiring efforts to promote Bethlehem 2000.

As we approach the conclusion of our debates in this millennium, and as we stand on the frontier of the new millennium, we can only remain hopeful and expectant that the years ahead hold good promise for all our work in our common quest for peace, harmony and prosperity. Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus hold the promise of our salvation, which I know will be with all of us. We must come to Bethlehem 2000 bearing our desire and commitment for peace, harmony and goodwill as gifts to the child in the manger.

Mr. Andjaba (Namibia): We are moving closer to the dawn of the new millennium and the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ in the city of Bethlehem. This historic event will be celebrated for a period beginning at Christmas this year and concluding at Easter 2001. This is an event which will be of considerable importance not only for the Palestinian people and the Middle East region, but for the international community as a whole, as it has significant religious, historical and cultural dimensions. I have taken the floor today to reaffirm my delegation's participation in this important event and to pledge our further support in organizing it through the Bethlehem 2000 project.

Since the Palestinian Authority launched the Bethlehem 2000 project, the vast challenges facing the organizers of the event have become well known. It is clear that it is up to us, the members of the international community, to contribute positively to ensure that Bethlehem 2000 is successful and to strengthen the event as a symbol of hope and peace. Various significant contributions have already been made and we are convinced that many more will be forthcoming.

One of the achievements in the preparations for the celebrations was the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference, which was held in Rome in February this year, under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People in cooperation with the Government of Italy and the Holy See. In adopting the Rome Declaration, the Conference undoubtedly contributed enormously to the organization of this historic event and to ensuring the broadest possible international participation. The Conference also significantly promoted the entire Middle East peace process.

The important role of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People — and particularly the efforts by its Chairman, Ambassador Ibra Deguène Ka of Senegal, to increase international awareness and support for the Bethlehem 2000 event through activities like the Rome International Conference, the African meeting in support of the inalienable rights of the Palestine People, held in Windhoek in April this year, the Cairo meetings held in June this year, and through art exhibitions and other methods — deserves our highest praise. We are convinced that with such leadership and with assistance from other actors, the Bethlehem 2000 celebrations will be highly successful and will sustain the message of peace and reconciliation for all humankind.

Finally, my delegation fully supports the draft resolution entitled "Bethlehem 2000". We regard it as an ideal instrument through which all of us can express our support for the strong message of peace it carries. It is our hope that it will be adopted without a vote.

Mr. Miranda (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): From their very beginnings, human beings have used the commemoration of events and circumstances that are considered important as opportunities for reflecting on the road already travelled, on their situation at the time and on their prospects for the future. Today, we stand on the threshold of the third millennium since the birth of Jesus in the Palestinian city of Bethlehem. This is a time of special significance, a time of meditation and of

rejoicing. Given those circumstances, we are turning to a symbol of peace, reconciliation, understanding, solidarity and justice. This symbol — the celebration of Bethlehem 2000 — has received the solid support and recognition of the countries of this Organization since the fifty-third session of the General Assembly through resolution 53/27, because it represents precisely those values that are the constant aspiration of the entire international community.

The importance that the international community attaches to this celebration gives rise to the desire to establish an atmosphere of peace and confidence that promotes dialogue, tolerance and cooperation for the benefit of all peoples, of different religions, cultures and nationalities. This is a fitting context in which to reiterate the fact that the best way of recognizing and celebrating the history and the future of the city of Bethlehem will be the attainment of a mutually satisfactory agreement of peace and reconciliation. Current circumstances allow us new hopes and new grounds for trust that with determination and will it will be possible to achieve that long-held aspiration to attain peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

The Bethlehem 2000 project seeks to celebrate, through cultural, artistic and religious events, the advent of the new millennium, with the participation of individuals of all ages and religions from every corner of the world, inspired by the message of peace and hope that the city has projected for 2000 years. That is why the delegation of Peru once again welcomes this initiative and hopes that during the next stage the relevant bodies will provide the necessary assurances for free and unimpeded access to the holy places for the faithful of all religions and for people of all nationalities.

Mr. Morel (Seychelles), Vice-President, took the Chair.

We wish also to reiterate the appeal for the financial support needed for the complete success of the project, whose purposes also include improving the infrastructure and services of that centre of pilgrimage and simultaneously to preserve its historic legacy, religious value and cultural heritage. Here, we want to call attention to the cooperation provided by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the World Bank.

The delegation of Peru wishes the Bethlehem 2000 project every success. It recalls once again the values it symbolizes and hopes that it will mark the beginning of a new era of peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding and cooperation among all human beings.

Mr. Akopian (Armenia): Let me begin by expressing my Government's support for the Bethlehem 2000 project initiated by the Palestinian National Authority, and for draft resolution A/54/L.11, entitled "Bethlehem 2000"; this is the second consecutive year that such a text has been submitted to the General Assembly for its consideration. We would also like to express our appreciation to all the countries and international and non-governmental organizations which are contributing to the success of this unique international project, and to express our thanks to the Government of Italy for hosting the Bethlehem 2000 International Conference in Rome on 18 and 19 February 1999.

It is only for the second time in history that mankind is making the transition to a new millennium. The first time, the expectations for the new millennium were of an apocalyptic nature. Mankind was terrified of the year 1000 and was helpless in the face of its horror. Today, as we approach the last year of this millennium, we are not horrified, but hopeful. Not surprisingly, the symbol of the turn of the millennium this second time is the town of Bethlehem in the Holy Land, where Jesus Christ was born 2,000 years ago, bringing a message of love, peace, forgiveness and tolerance. The Bethlehem 2000 project aims at reviving the town's municipal infrastructure, which is very important in a region where economic degradation adds very dangerously to political tension. We hope that the project will bring economic benefits to the peoples of the region, who need to see the practical results of the peace process. But at the same time, Bethlehem 2000 provides us with a unique chance to return to our spiritual cradle and, through its renewal, to regain global hope for peace and reconciliation.

The 16-month-long programme of millennium celebrations proposed by the Palestinian Authority is impressive, and it certainly deserves to be supported and promoted by the international community. The consideration in the General Assembly of the item "Bethlehem 2000" and the important role played by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank and other organizations and agencies of the United Nations system constitute the best evidence of such support and promotion. Active engagement of the international donor community in the development of Bethlehem's basic infrastructure, public services and tourist facilities and in the preservation of its

rich cultural heritage is also essential for ensuring the success of the project.

We would like to stress the importance of the cultural programme of the Bethlehem 2000 project. The language of the arts is the most perfect one; it allows diverse nations to communicate spiritually and to establish ties on a very subtle level. We hope to witness in Bethlehem an unprecedented year-long arts festival which will bring together diverse cultures and unify them in a strong appeal for peace and understanding. And in this respect it is worth remembering that Bethlehem was also the birthplace of King David, who apart from being one of the greatest kings of Israel, was also an outstanding man of the arts.

For us Armenians the Holy Land and the town of Bethlehem are not only religious symbols and political realities. The Holy Land is a place where Armenians have been living for some 16 centuries as a well organized community with its own national and religious institutions concentrated in the Armenian quarter, which is one of four historical quarters of the Old City of Jerusalem. An Armenian Patriarchate was established in Jerusalem after Armenia adopted Christianity as its official religion in the year 301, thus becoming the first Christian nation in the world. In 2001 we, under the patronage of UNESCO, will celebrate the one-thousand-seven-hundredth anniversary of that significant event in our history, in a certain way preserving and echoing the spirit of the Bethlehem 2000 project. The Armenian Apostolic Church shares equal responsibility with the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches as custodian of holy sites of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other cities. We believe that this project will ensure increased safe access to the holy sites in the future for believers of all religions, which is very important for creating and preserving an atmosphere of mutual confidence and understanding.

Those are the reasons why we are not indifferent to issues related to the Holy Land. Having thousands of our compatriots living in Israel and in the area of Palestinian autonomy, we are vitally interested in peace and stability in that part of the world. We are optimistic that the Middle East peace process will continue on the right track, thus ensuring a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the region. We are hopeful that the Bethlehem 2000 project will be remembered by future generations as the beginning of a new era in the history of the Middle East: an era of peace under the star of Bethlehem.

The Acting President: In accordance with General Assembly resolution 48/265 of 24 August 1994, I now call on the observer for the Sovereign Military Order of Malta.

Mr. Linati-Bosch (Sovereign Military Order of Malta): I am grateful for this opportunity to address the General Assembly on behalf of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. The Order of Malta was founded in Jerusalem 900 years ago, and its history is related to the historical development of the Holy Land, a fact that highlights the legitimacy of our interest in all matters related to present-day Palestine.

It is not my intention to talk about memories and remembrances, but allow me to recall that in 1949 the United Nations was considering the possibility of granting international status to the holy sites through an agreement among several Powers and the Vatican State, and of giving the Sovereign Order an administrative and authoritative role.

Today, the activities of the Order are exemplified by its presence in Tantur since the end of the nineteenth century by virtue of an agreement between the Order and the Ottoman Empire, and especially by the Holy Family maternity hospital in Bethlehem, which conducts almost 3,000 deliveries per year. The hospital serves the greater Bethlehem area, including Hebron, and carries out 40,000 consultations annually. It also operates four outreach clinics to provide care to pregnant mothers in their villages; its capacity will be expanded in the near future. The activities of the Order in the Holy Land are conducted through the Holy Land Foundation of the Order of Malta.

We all know that problems cannot be considered unilaterally or as isolated phenomena, as one problem is always connected with other problems and, at the same time, is a consequence of its own complexity. The Holy Land is the best of examples. The problem of the Holy Land is a multiform one with aspects related to economic, social, historical, religious and cultural issues, including armed conflicts. This means that it would be useless to reach a solution if it did not involve all these facets according to the principle of law that a legal norm must be clear, just, possible to apply, based on justice and adequate to the moment and the circumstances.

There is a consensus in the admission that the Palestinian problem must reach a satisfactory solution. Obviously, it is not easy to arrive at this happy ending. As we said before, the historical roots of the problem, its religious implications, economic reasons and many other

difficulties make the way to peace a very difficult one. Consequently, the launching of the Bethlehem 2000 project cannot be considered a solution in itself. We need the cooperation of all the members of the international community in a coordinated operation devoted to the benefit of mankind and sponsored by the common goodwill of all its members. Organizational and preparatory actions for the attainment of these aims include financial and technical measures. The United Nations is the most important international organization to play an explicit role in attracting the attention of the world to the importance of this occasion, helping to make the event a moment of hope, peace, coexistence and prosperity.

The roots of each and every culture and civilization are involved in Bethlehem 2000. We must work together so that it can satisfy the rights of the people involved in the framework of self-determination, national sovereignty and independence. These are the reasons, among others, that call for strong and increased international assistance to the project. Allow me to say that celebration can lead the way to reconciliation and that only collective efforts will make a significant contribution towards a just and lasting peace in the region.

The Bethlehem 2000 anniversary celebration must be transformed into something that brings economic benefits to the Holy Land. The people living there have a right to benefit from the practical results of the economic prosperity that the project can bring them. In fact, some of these goals can be reached if we remember that Bethlehem 2000 implies the restoration of historical, archaeological and religious sites of importance. The Brussels Conference of 12 May 1998 counted among those who attended the European Commission, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Bank, all of which will help, or are helping by now, with logistical support and will stimulate cooperation between official and private entities. The United Nations must join these efforts, contributing to their relevance and bearing in mind that Israeli-Palestinian cooperation is essential for the success of the Bethlehem 2000 project. We must consider that Bethlehem 2000 is not a message limited solely to the Holy Land but is a universal message for the family of humans to live in harmony and peace.

We are at the gates of a new millennium that will bring to all the international community hope for a better world, a peaceful world, and will bring reconciliation and understanding among all nations and all regions. The project can become the first step in a long journey if we are able to convert it into a proposal for dialogue.

In concluding, the Sovereign Military Order of Malta would like to reaffirm its firm commitment to a just and comprehensive settlement in the Middle East, as stated in the Madrid and Oslo accords. To the fullest extent of its possibilities, the Order of Malta will continue to carry out its substantial economic and hospitaller work with a view to contributing to a prosperous future.

The Acting President: In accordance with the decision taken earlier, I now call on the Observer of the Holy See.

Archbishop Martino (Holy See): On 18 November 1998, this Assembly adopted without a vote the historic resolution 53/27, on Bethlehem 2000. The Holy See welcomes that initiative of the General Assembly and expresses its special, sincere appreciation to all who made it possible. My delegation equally commends the intention of the General Assembly to revisit this item at the dawn of the third millennium.

The President returned to the Chair.

The draft resolution before the Assembly on Bethlehem 2000 is rich in content and far-reaching in its application. It recalls in its first preambular paragraph that "the Palestinian city of Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus Christ and one of the most historic and significant sites on earth" and notes in the next paragraph that "the world will celebrate in Bethlehem, a city of peace, the onset of the new millennium in a global vision of hope for all peoples". It welcomes, in operative paragraph 1, "the impending arrival of the global, historic celebration in Bethlehem of the birth of Jesus Christ and the onset of the third millennium as a symbol of the shared hope for peace among all peoples of the world". It expresses support, in the next paragraph, "for the Bethlehem 2000 project and commends the efforts undertaken by the Palestinian Authority in this regard".

In line with the content of this draft resolution, my delegation would like to dwell mainly on three aspects of the agenda item "Bethlehem 2000", namely, the city of Bethlehem, the person born there, Jesus, and the message that Bethlehem conveys to all peoples of every age.

Bethlehem stands at the crossroad of history, giving us a profound vision of the past and pointing to a new

way of peace and hope. With the etymological connotation "house of bread", Bethlehem enters the annals of history in the fourteenth century B.C. For almost four centuries, it remained at the margins of history, until the tenth century B.C., when the great King David made Bethlehem "his house". After King David and until the beginning of this era, Bethlehem was almost left in oblivion. Still it contained a continued lineage of solid hope and unquenched expectation. The fulfilment of that hope and expectation was the birth of Jesus, son of David, in Bethlehem. Jesus' lowly birth gives Bethlehem its unique place in the mind and heart of the world. As Pope John Paul II has said, though the message of Bethlehem was, among other things, the promise of peace, Bethlehem's history since then has often been marked by violence. Yet millions will flock to the relatively small city of Bethlehem during the coming year in search of the peace, for themselves and for the world, that was announced at the birth of Christ.

Taking account of the religious, historical and cultural dimensions of the millennium event, the Bethlehem 2000 project, planned by the Palestinian Authority, is a laudable initiative. As Christ is the patrimony of all of humanity, so too Bethlehem, his birthplace, is the patrimony of humanity, and thus it requires special protection and guarantees that ensure free and unhindered access to the holy places in Bethlehem to the faithful of all religions and the citizens of all nationalities. The draft resolution on "Bethlehem 2000" clearly makes such provisions.

After decades of violence, what Bethlehem and its inhabitants need most today is peace. Peace delayed could become peace denied, and whichever side holds the peace talks back will be judged responsible by history for any resulting negative consequences and further escalation of violence. It is the sincere hope of the Holy See that all the actors will play their respective and relevant roles, so that the millennium may be celebrated most appropriately in an atmosphere of peace and reconciliation — not only in Bethlehem, but also in Nazareth, the Holy City of Jerusalem and elsewhere in the Middle East. The 5 September agreement of this year contains promising provisions in this regard, and we earnestly hope that they will be fully implemented within the given time-frame.

In the child born in Bethlehem of Judea, God identified himself with the poor and abandoned, the displaced and the refugee, victims of injustice and the outcasts from the mainstream of society of all ages and places. Jesus, born in Bethlehem and brought up in Nazareth in a carpenter's family, had one fundamental message for humanity: the message of love. He exemplified in himself the message of a serving love because he did not live for himself but for others. The concept of love found in the person of Jesus a new definition: self-giving. He sealed that definition with his own blood on the cross.

The vision of self-giving love includes everyone and excludes no one; it respects life and calls for the dignity of every human person; it provides an option for the poor and the oppressed; it demands justice for all and envisages the principle of solidarity in the world. It teaches that giving is loftier than receiving and calls for a new social order. Such a vision has to be the underlying current of the new era.

The spirit of Jesus' self-giving love lives on today and continues to inspire millions, as it has during the past two millennia. Hence, Jesus is not a religious leader of the past but a heavenly beacon of love and life for men and women who seek in darkness the sense of life and who suffer the wounds caused by the violation of the dignity of their persons. To a world possessed by egoism and introversion, Jesus of Nazareth makes his invitation for the conversion of hearts, and, in the midst of hatred and oppression, he intones the good tidings of fellowship and solidarity.

Bethlehem was the meeting place of heaven and earth where glory to God and peace to men of good will was proclaimed. The first visitors to experience God's peace in the manger of Bethlehem were the humble shepherds from the neighbouring valleys. The wise men in search of peace were also guided to that lowly abode by a star of hope.

The first truth about the peace announced in Bethlehem is that it is not man-made but God-given. At the same time, men and women are not merely beneficiaries of that gift but real actors in preparing the venue for that gift. Jesus himself calls the peacemakers "blessed" as he did those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. But only in humility, like the shepherds and the wise men of Bethlehem, will peace be given to us.

Peace is not merely the absence of war. It is growth in harmony, the growing of all of creation, with the human person at its centre, towards the Creator. If this harmony of essential and fundamental relations is disturbed, peace will become a mirage. Keeping the right relation between God and man and between man and

man — the vertical and horizontal dimensions of human life — is a precondition for peace.

Peace is possible only where a will to reconciliation exists. Hatred begets only hatred. Reconciliation requires courage and generosity. Letting the old wounds of hatred and violence bleed again is to deny peace a chance. The call to forgiveness was the final message of Jesus. Where the will to forgive prevails, war and conflict will find no place.

At the end of the second millennium, and in the wake of the divisions, wars, violence and atrocities that have often marked its years, the human family needs a moment of self-examination. It badly needs such a moment to realize the evil of which humanity is capable. It equally needs this moment to commit itself to a new life, devoid of egoism and hatred. Concretely, that means a resolve and commitment to a new ideal in life. If that ideal is the self-giving love exemplified in the person of Jesus, our entry into the new millennium will be a decisive and positive step in history.

The United Nations, by its very definition, is the organization holding the noble mandate of maintaining international peace and security. Yet no other world body is as aware as the United Nations of the difficulties in maintaining peace in the world. The awareness that peace is a gift of God would make the international community better realize its limitations and look for means to create the right environment for that gift to be received. That is exactly the role of this unique organization, and the start of the new millennium could be the propitious moment for entering into such an awareness.

The call of God to humanity two thousand years ago in the babe of Bethlehem is one of hope, not one of fear and anxiety. His extended and embracing hands are a symbol for all. Let self-giving love and God-given peace be the guiding principles for the human family entering the new millennium. And let it be especially so for the people in and around Bethlehem and throughout the Middle East.

The President: We have heard the last speaker in the debate on this item.

The Assembly will now take a decision on draft resolution A/54/L.20. I should like to announce that, since the introduction of the draft resolution, the following countries have become co-sponsors: Armenia, Cameroon, Grenada, Panama and the Philippines.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt draft resolution A/54/L.20?

Draft resolution A/54/L.20 was adopted (resolution 54/22).

The President: I call on the representative of Israel, who wishes to speak in explanation of position on the resolution just adopted. May I remind delegations that explanations of vote are limited to 10 minutes and should be made by representatives from their seats.

Mr. Jacob (Israel): Israel welcomes with open arms the Christian pilgrims from across the globe who will come to celebrate the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus in the ancient land then known as Judea. The event will be a proud moment in the history of Christianity, uniting peoples from around the world on the very ground from which their heritage sprang forth.

As the nation that will play host to the thousands of pilgrims, welcoming them at our airports and hotels, our churches and historic sites, Israel is proud to take part in this momentous occasion. That is why, through the newly established Israel 2000 Authority, our Government has worked extensively to enhance facilities, hotels and roads as the date approaches. Moreover, Israel has invested close to $1 billion to make this event as fulfilling as possible for the Christian pilgrims.

The Bethlehem 2000 events are an integral part of this goal. The city of Bethlehem is just a few kilometres south of Jerusalem and a majority of pilgrims will likely be hosted in Jerusalem's many hotels. Thus, Israel's Bethlehem 2000 programme focuses extensively on improving lodging conditions in Jerusalem and on easing access and transportation between the two cities.

Cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is essential. We would like to take this opportunity to welcome the recent convening of the Bethlehem 2000 Israeli-Palestinian Steering Committee, which met last week for the first time and is set to continue meeting on a weekly basis. This Committee was established in order to address all the relevant issues in a timely and efficient manner. A special focus will be movement and access to Bethlehem. We estimate that, from December 1999 to April 2001, Bethlehem will host an average of 10,000 visitors daily, who will require approximately 200 tour buses. In this context, Israel and the Palestinians have already begun implementing joint plans to improve and expand the main thoroughfare

leading to Bethlehem from Jerusalem, known as Route 300. Similar improvements are also being made in the crossing facility between Jerusalem and the Palestinian Authority-administered area of Bethlehem. Such steps will ease access to tourists and Palestinians alike, while continuing to ensure security for all.

These efforts to enhance the pilgrimage experience follow a proud Israeli tradition of promoting religious freedom. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, we have enabled all groups to enjoy the benefits of the holy places in our jurisdiction, making these sites the freest and most accessible they have been in two millenniums. The Christian community, for example, has enjoyed unlimited rights of religious activity, fulfilment and control in the holy sites of Jerusalem and Nazareth and others throughout the country. That tradition will help make next year's celebration of the birth of Jesus a more meaningful experience for all who participate.

But for some unfortunate terminology, this resolution could have reflected the universal importance of the Bethlehem 2000 project and received our unqualified support. An example of this is the resolution's reference to Bethlehem as a "Palestinian city". Although Bethlehem was, during the time of Jesus, a Judean city, the political and legal disposition of the city today is still pending the negotiated permanent status agreement between the sides. We would have preferred that this Assembly avoid taking a position in its resolutions that prejudges the outcome of negotiations now under way.

It is our hope that the spirit of cooperation between peoples and religions reflected in our joint plans for the year 2000 will, in the end, prevail. We will endeavour to do our utmost, even in these deliberations, to protect the uplifting spirit of Bethlehem 2000. That is why Israel has joined the consensus on the resolution just adopted, despite its reservations.

The President: I call on the representative of Slovakia on a point of order.

Mr. Gabriel (Slovakia): Slovakia aligns itself with the statement of the European Union delivered by the representative of Finland this morning.

The President: I call on the observer of Palestine, who wishes to speak in exercise of the right of reply.

Mr. Al-Kidwa (Palestine): Our request might seem unusual in the context of the normal procedure in the Assembly, by which a certain delegation may not make a complete political statement in explanation of vote. However, I want to say briefly how delighted we are that the draft resolution has been adopted by consensus. I just want to add that our talk on Jerusalem must be based on the fact that Jerusalem is an integral part of the occupied territories, to which the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 applies.

This is a question that has been debated at length in the Security Council and in the General Assembly in previous years, and is debated even to this day. Without going into detail, allow me to say that we cannot accept the allegations made by the representative of Israel regarding Israel's behaviour towards the holy places and the Christians, in particular Palestinian Christians.

Finally, it is regrettable that the representative of Israel has expressed his objection to describing Bethlehem as a Palestinian city in the draft resolution just adopted. This is another example of the Israeli position regarding a Palestinian city, all of whose inhabitants are Palestinians. Even that city has been objected to by the representative of Israel.

Bethlehem has been described as a Palestinian city, but the representative of Israel thinks that it should be subject to negotiations. This problem will continue as long as the Israeli occupation goes on in the Holy Land, and as long as Israel continues to take illegal measures that run counter to international law and the resolutions of the Security Council.

We would have preferred not to have taken the floor on this point, because we are taking a new look at the future, which is full of hope, in view of the historic commemoration of Bethlehem 2000. As I said, I do not want to go into the details of this. I prefer that we all focus on this great positive event that has been achieved today, Sir, under your presidency: the adoption of the resolution.

The President: May I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly to conclude its consideration of agenda item 36?

It was so decided.

Agenda item 17 *(continued)*

Appointments to fill vacancies in subsidiary organs and other appointments

(i) Appointment of the Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services

Letter from the Secretary-General to the President of the General Assembly (A/54/531)

The President: I should like to draw the attention of Members to the letter from the Secretary-General issued as document A/54/531. In that letter, the Secretary-General informs the General Assembly that consultations regarding the appointment of the Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services have not yet been concluded.

The Secretary-General further informs the General Assembly that, as the term of office of the current Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services is due to expire on 14 November 1999, and pending completion of the consultations regarding his possible successor, he has decided to request Mr. Hans Corell, Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, the Legal Counsel, to oversee the Office of Internal Oversight Services. This temporary arrangement is not expected to be a prolonged one, and the Secretary-General will submit a name to the General Assembly shortly for its consideration and approval.

May I take it that the General Assembly takes note of the letter from the Secretary-General?

It was so decided.

The President: We have thus concluded this stage of our consideration of sub-item (i) of agenda item 17.

Agenda item 37 *(continued)*

Implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development

Draft resolution (A/54/L.16)

The President: As members will recall, the debate on agenda item 37 was held at the 28th, 30th and 31st plenary meetings, on 6, 7 and 8 October, respectively.

In connection with this item, the Assembly has before it a draft resolution issued as document A/54/L.16.

I now call on the representative of Chile to introduce draft resolution A/54/L.16.

Mr. Tapia (Chile)(*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of the 116 sponsors listed in the draft resolution, I have the pleasure to introduce the draft resolution entitled "Implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development", contained in document A/54/L.16, under the General Assembly's agenda item 37. Guinea and Togo should be added to the original list of sponsors.

The draft resolution that my country has submitted on this occasion reaffirms once again the commitments undertaken by the heads of State and Government at the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995, and it emphasizes the need to give highest priority to policies aimed at promoting progress and social justice, as well as the improvement of the human condition, on the basis of full participation by all.

The draft resolution also reiterates the need for effective interaction between economic and social policies, underscoring the need to invest in persons and their well-being, which is the only means of achieving the objectives of social development.

Bearing in mind that the preparatory process for the holding of a special session of the General Assembly to review the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development has begun its work broadly and comprehensively, as regards both the level of compliance with the Copenhagen commitments by Member States and possible new initiatives for better implementation of these commitments, the draft resolution that we are introducing this year focuses on emphasizing the progress achieved in the Preparatory Committee, which is already analysing substantive issues.

It also reaffirms once again that the objectives of the special session will be to reaffirm the Declaration and Programme of action agreed at the Summit and not to renegotiate them.

The draft resolution reiterates an invitation to Member States to participate in the special session at the highest possible political level and also reiterates the invitation to the United Nations system, including the Bretton Woods institutions, to continue to contribute both to the preparatory process and to the special session, which will be held in Geneva from 26 to 30 June 2000.

As for the agreements reached in the Preparatory Committee, the draft takes note of the important decision adopted by that Committee regarding accreditation and modalities for participation of non-governmental organizations, as well as the arrangements for the special session recommended by the Preparatory Committee and

adopted by the General Assembly in decision 54/404 of 8 October 1999.

The draft also recalls that the special session will be entitled "World Summit for Social Development and beyond: achieving social development for all in a globalizing world".

Furthermore, regarding the work of the Commission for Social Development in the preparatory process, the draft recalls that the Commission will have the responsibility of acting as the forum for national reporting and of identifying areas in which the Preparatory Committee should study the possibility of adopting further initiatives.

The draft also expresses appreciation to the Government of Switzerland for initiating and conducting making arrangements for the special session, preparations that, in the view of my delegation, ensure the success of the special session.

Lastly, the draft decides to include in the agenda of the fifty-fifth session of the General Assembly the item entitled "Implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development and of the special session of the General Assembly in this regard".

Before concluding, I wish to thank all the delegations and the Secretariat for their commitment and their dedication to the draft resolution. My delegation also wishes to express very special appreciation for the excellent work accomplished by the Counsel of the Brazilian Mission, Mrs. Marcela Nicodemos who for the third year in a row led the informal consultations that brought about the final text of this draft resolution in an effective, professional and expeditious manner.

For our part, we reiterate once again the firm resolve of the Government and the Mission of Chile to continue to promote the process of following up the implementation of the commitments undertaken in Copenhagen, both in the context of the Preparatory Committee, over which Chile presides, and in the special session that we will be holding next year in Geneva.

My delegation hopes that, as in previous years, the draft resolution on this subject will be adopted by consensus in the General Assembly thus reflecting the firm commitment of the international community to the principles and objectives of social development.

The President: The Assembly will now take a decision on draft resolution A/54/L.16.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt the draft resolution?

Draft resolution A/54/L.16 was adoption (resolution 54/23).

The President: The General Assembly has thus concluded this stage of its consideration of agenda item 37.

Agenda item 106 *(continued)*

Social Development, including questions relating to the world social situation and to youth, ageing, disabled persons and the family: follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons

Draft resolution (A/54/L.6/Rev.1)

The President: As members will recall, under agenda item 106 four plenary meetings devoted to the follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons were held on 4 and 5 October. In connection with this item, the Assembly has before it a draft resolution issued as document A/54/L.6/Rev.1, entitled "Follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons: a society for all ages".

I now call on the representative of the Dominican Republic to introduce draft resolution A/54/L.6/Rev.1.

Ms. Alvarez (Dominican Republic) *(spoke in Spanish):* I wish first of all to clarify the fact that this draft resolution was introduced in the Assembly on 5 October, in one of the four plenary meetings held as follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons. Today we simply wish to make a minor oral revision to the text, the need for which was brought to our attention by the legal services of the United Nations.

The revision should be made to the last clause of paragraph 17 of the draft resolution. In the fifth line, the phrase "through the Economic and Social Council" should be added after the words "General Assembly". Thus, the last clause of paragraph 17 should read as follows:

"and to report to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council on this issue during its fifty-fourth session".

With this oral revision, it is the hope of the sponsors that the Assembly will be able to adopt the draft resolution.

The President: I call on the representative of the United States for an explanation of vote.

Ms. Baskette (United States): The United States joins the consensus on this draft resolution on the understanding that the proposed World Assembly on Ageing will be funded entirely outside of the regular United Nations budget.

The President: I should like to announce that since the introduction of draft resolution A/54/L.6/Rev.1, the following countries have become sponsors: Armenia, Bolivia, France, Guinea, Israel, Italy, Malaysia, the Republic of Moldova and Senegal.

The Assembly will now take a decision on draft resolution A/54/L.6/Rev.1, as orally revised.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt the draft resolution, as orally revised?

Draft resolution A/54/L.6/Rev.1, as orally revised, was adopted (resolution 54/24).

The President: We have thus concluded this stage of our consideration of agenda item 106.

Programme of work

The President: I should now like to make an announcement concerning agenda item 20, entitled "Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance".

I have requested His Excellency Mr. Jørgen Bøjer, Permanent Representative of Denmark to the United Nations, to be the coordinator of the informal consultations on the draft resolutions under agenda item 20, and he has graciously accepted.

May I request those delegations intending to submit draft resolutions under agenda item 20 to do so as early as possible in order to allow time, if need be, for negotiations, with a view to reaching consensus on the draft resolutions.

The meeting rose at 1.15 p.m.